

The risk of not trying something new

BY ED BERNACKI

FOR READERS WHO have used typewriters, you know the IBM Selecta was a model of innovation. You could use correctable tape. You could change the font. What power the machine gave you.

Part of my first job was to produce newsletters. I typed a draft version. It was corrected. I then retyped a final version. A typesetter then retyped the article for layout. This was my story until 1984 – when we bought computers.

The PC meant I had to unlearn how I created stories on a typewriter and relearn how to do it on a computer.

This involved two aspects:

- learning how to use the technology
- learning to see what was possible with the technology.

In the end, I realised the second type of learning was more challenging and powerful. The computer was much more than a typewriter on steroids!

The need to unlearn what we hold as “fact” and relearn how we do things is the essence of business innovation. What are you resisting to unlearn and relearn?

I hear two stories to excuse why people claim that innovation is not important. I want to address them.

“Being innovative is too risky”

To deal with this issue, I will use a technique for prompting new thinking – do the reverse.

For example, to plan an event, you develop a “to do” list to be successful. To enhance your thinking, also produce a “to fail” list. If you identify the top issues that could cause you to fail, and you avoid them, you succeed. This is a powerful tool.

Let’s look at the notion of risk. In its most basic terms, if the risk of trying something new is too high, what is the risk of not trying something new?

From the research on decision making in organisations, there are common results regardless of the country or the industry.

People in organisations are:

- slower to react to opportunities than the alarm bells of problems
- often pick the first alternative that minimally meets the standards of acceptability.

Let’s ask the question again. If being innovative is too risky, what is the risk of picking the first minimally acceptable solution that is a reaction to a problem? As a decision-maker, which is a bigger risk to long-term

profitability: one in which you or your staff look for new options or one in which you accept the first minimally acceptable option?

“There’s no need for innovation in our industry”

People continue to think like this until a competitor does something no one else thought of. They break the industry rules and do something new. Every business presents customers with products or services that represent the best solution of the day. If something better

comes along, customers tend to move to the new product.

If your business does not need innovation, what does this say about the solutions you offer customers? What’s the opposite of an innovative solution? You may not like the answer. The opposite of an innovative solution is what I call “acceptable mediocrity”. It may not be bad, but how good is it? The biggest risk to a company, industry or country that thinks innovation is not important is becoming complacent.

Every organisation can profit from being more innovative in its products or services, marketing, or leadership. So take away the perception of risk and replace it with the perception that new ideas are important. On the other hand, you can continue to use the IBM Selectra. It was a good idea in its day.

